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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Will Harry Potter become a classic?

An exploration of J.K. Rowling's
masterpiece.

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Abstract

This essay will explore the possibilities that the Harry Potter saga has to become part of the classics of literature. In order to do so, it will first inquire into the genre of children's literature, then it will briefly examine the literary canon and the different inclusion criteria. Throughout the study, evidence will be provided about how Harry Potter fits into both the genre and the canon, focusing on the success the book has had worldwide and the resulting cultural phenomenon. In this sense, this essay is going to analyse facts such as the number of books sold, how they influenced children, and how they had such an impact in the world that a new sport and a new music genre were created. Finally, it will prove how all this contributes to create the idea that this series will become a classic.

Key words: Harry Potter, Children's Literature, Literary Canon, Moral Development

Resumen

Este ensayo explorará las posibilidades que tiene la saga de Harry Potter de formar parte de los clásicos de la literatura. Para ello, primero investigará el género de la literatura infantil, y luego examinará brevemente el canon literario y los diferentes criterios de inclusión. A lo largo del estudio, se aportarán pruebas sobre cómo encaja Harry Potter tanto en el género como en el canon, centrándose en el éxito que ha tenido el libro en todo el mundo y el fenómeno cultural resultante. En este sentido, este ensayo va a analizar hechos como el número de libros vendidos, cómo influyeron en los niños y cómo tuvieron tal impacto en el mundo que se crearon un nuevo deporte y un nuevo género musical. Finalmente demostrará cómo todo esto contribuye a crear la idea de que esta serie se convertirá en un clásico.

Palabras clave: Harry Potter, Literatura Infantil, Canon Literario, Desarrollo Moral

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I. Introduction.

Since the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997 by Bloomsbury publishing house, both the book and the author, J.K. Rowling, were highly mentioned in the media due to the hype it had. The story of an eleven-year-old boy who discovers that he is a wizard and goes to a magical boarding school did not let anybody indifferent, but not as much as the fact that, in spite of being a book for children, it became equally read by children, young adults, and adults. This drew the attention of critics and academics, who began to make their own conjectures and judgements about the work; after all, they seemed only books for children. Thence, the aim of this essay is to provide evidence that this series will become, first and foremost, a classic of children's literature, and, secondly, a work that could fit the criteria to become part of the Western literary canon. In order to achieve that, I will provide a definition of children's literature, as well as different ideas about the literary canon to see how Harry Potter belongs to both of them. Then I will explore both Harry Potter's world and its success, focusing on how it influenced children and subsequent children's books.

1.1. Children's literature

According to the American scholar Philip Nel, children's literature comprises books that people read when their self is still developing, as well as their ideas. He states that these books not only share messages about values or knowledge, but also increase the pleasure of reading (23). In this sense, it is acceptable to think that a writer of children's books addresses his or her work to more audiences, not only children, but adults as well, than a writer of literature intended for adults only. As Jack Zipes claims, "it is much more difficult to write a publishable work intended for children, certainly much more complicated, especially if the writer is concerned about finding a narrative voice or images to which children must respond" (44).

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone itself was rejected several times by publishing houses because, amongst other issues, they considered that children would not read a book of that length. Bloomsbury decided to give it a chance, beginning with an initial print run of 500 copies. Meanwhile, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), the

last instalment, which had an initial print run of 12 million copies, broke the record of being the fastest-selling fiction book in 24 hours, reaching 8.3 million copies in its release day only in the United States, according to the Guinness World Records. Nowadays, the series has sold more than 500 million copies worldwide, and has been translated into 80 different languages.

Many scholars consider that a work of literature belongs to children's literature due to the image of their readers that forms in their mind: "The children's book can be defined in term of the implied reader. It will be clear, from a careful reading, who a book is designed for" (Gupta 42). On his part, Zipes believes that a children's book writer looks for a good definition of what childhood should be; he thinks "the writer conceptualizes what the child as implied reader is" (44). Let us put as example *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens: the main character is a young boy who has to face several problems and find the way to survive in an unfair world. Nevertheless, it is not considered children's literature, in that Oliver's childhood is far from being ideal, and the messages sent by the author are darker than the ones you can find in a children's book. In other words, it is not a children's book because the implied reader is not a child.

In fact, all those behind the production of a children's book are adults, such as the writer, the publishing house, the editor, the designer, etc. As Zipes states, adults are the ones who produce children's literature, and they evaluate the quality of it, excluding the opinion of kids and teenagers, although they are who engage with and appreciate these kinds of works (63). Regarding the quality of the general reading experience, the *Harry Potter* series has been categorized as 'easy reading', in that it can be read effortlessly "with one familiar strategy and develop coherently through a single uncomplicated perspective" (Gupta 30). Is this the reason why it is considered for children? Or is the reason the huge magical and fantastic world created by the author, which enchanted children as well as teenagers and adults? One must agree with Zipes, who believes that "there is nothing definitive about a text or a book that automatically demands that it be classified as a children's book" (65).

II. Different approaches to the literary canon

2.1. Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*

In its origin, 'literary canon' meant the books chosen by the teaching institutions (Bloom 15), books that are worthy to be taught in that they have something special, something different to other books that made them well-known in their period and perdure for centuries. In other words, the canon comprises texts competing with each other for survival (Bloom 19).

This scholar also states that literary influence is fundamental for a work to become strongly canonical (7). Almost every work of literature has come under the influence of major works. Harry Potter includes such references: *The Iliad*, when Harry took Cedric's corpse to his father; *The Bible*, when Harry dies and comes back to life; *The Canterbury Tales*, specifically the *The Pardoner's Tale*, which Rowling used to create the tale of the origin of the deathly hallows; Greek mythology, with the three-headed dog, and so forth. Bloom also claims that "literature is not merely language, it is also the will to figuration, the motive for metaphor that Nietzsche once defined as the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere" (11). One of the main reasons why a person reads a book tends to be the desire to disconnect from reality and be transported to a very different world.

2.2. Italo Calvino's *Why Read the Classics?*

This work by Calvino comprises several definitions of what a classic should be, yet only those relevant for the discussion on the Harry Potter series will be discussed. For Calvino "the classics are those books about which you usually hear people saying 'I'm rereading...' never 'I'm reading...'" (10). Furthermore, according to this scholar, a classic should be unforgettable, it should exercise such influence that it will remain in our minds forever (10), and even when we read it for the first time, it should "give the sense of rereading something we have read before" (11). Reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* evokes *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, specifically when Lucy travels to Narnia through the wardrobe, such as Harry travels to Hogwarts through the barrier between platforms nine and ten to reach the platform nine and three-quarters. Another definition defends that "classics are books

which, the more we think we know them through hearsay, the more original, unexpected, and innovative we find them when we actually read them” (11). In Harry Potter, readers find amongst its pages a completely new world that surpasses any expectation. Moreover, one of Calvino’s definitions states that a proper classic should help you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it (12). How many times did the Harry Potter readers define themselves in relation with the different Hogwarts’ houses? For instance, if someone says “I’m from Gryffindor”, we immediately think of a noble and brave person. Likewise, we can see this in people defining themselves as one of Austen’s heroines, or Shakespeare’s heroes.

2.3. Critical essays on the canon

In this section I will discuss less limiting approaches to the literary canon. First, Earl R. Anderson defends that Bloom’s canon is invalid, in that every literary work is equally a member of the set of ‘literature’, thus is impossible to exclude any literary piece from the canon. In accordance with this scholar, there are no good or bad instances of literature (1443). He also states that some scholars define the canon in terms of examples rather than the real characteristics of canonical works, claiming that nearly every critical work about “opening up the canon” defines this word with possible works that must or must not be included on it (1442).

On the other hand, the scholar Alastair Fowler differentiates amongst six types of canon: the *official canon* is the one “institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism”; the *personal canon* is composed of works each individual knows and values (98). The known as *potential canon* “comprises the entire written corpus, together with all surviving oral literature” (99). Meanwhile there is an *accessible canon*, which only comprises those works that are available for some social groups. From this accessible canon is created the *selective canon*, certain works selected for their study (99). The last one is the *critical canon*, which is composed of works exclusively chosen for study, from a critical perspective (99). In Barbara Mujica’s opinion, these categories overlap, the canon is continually changing as new works are emerging and accessible to critical study. She states that Bloom considers works canonical in that they are superior in aesthetic terms, and he opposes admitting works on any ground, irrespective of those who “value diversity above excellence” (209).

III. *Harry Potter*

3.1. Overview

The original Harry Potter series includes seven books. Since the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the series earned such popularity amongst youngsters and adults worldwide that nowadays it is the best-selling book series in history. In the New York Times Bestseller List, the most significant best-selling books list in the U.S., Harry Potter has been in the ranking for 575 weeks, in the category of Children's Series. This is outstanding given that "most books stay on NYTBL for only a week, and books lasting more than a year are extremely rare" (Yucesoy et al. 6).

Why such recognition for a children's book? Harry Potter is a medley of different genres: fantasy, bildungsroman, thriller, adventure, romance, mystery, etc. In fact, it is possible to define the series as a struggle between good and evil, when, at the end, love and friendship defeat hatred. But the story includes more than these. It has loss, injustice, the power of family, different moral values that can be discovered throughout the books.

3.2. Influence on children

In *Why Read the Classics?* Calvino addressed how reading affects children and youngsters. He defends that it shapes their future experiences and provides "ways of dealing with them, terms of comparison... all things which continue to operate in us even when we remember little or nothing about the book we read when young" (10). This means that we may not remember the story of a book, but the moral value it taught us.

Then, how did Harry Potter influence children? As I mentioned before, the novels are filled with values that may help to give shape to children's and youngsters' character. Firstly, "to act in a moral way, a person must first understand how his or her actions affect the welfare of others, judge whether such actions are right or wrong, intend to act in accord with this judgement and follow through with this intention" (Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl 197). In the novels, the transgression of the school's rules leads to the reduction of house points, while good behaviour results in the awarding of points. This system "promotes moral responsibility by proactively reinforcing prosocial behaviour and a sense of collective responsibility" (Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl 197). Despite

the fact that Harry has never received a good education and only experienced cruelty, he has a notable good heart and always tries to do the right thing. As Gupta claims, “the Harry Potter stories centre on what children need to find internally – the strength to do the right thing, to establish a moral code” (44).

Throughout the novels, the power of friendship and love are in constant struggle with greed and evil. Let us take for instance the philosopher’s stone and how Harry was never tempted to have it for himself: “‘A stone that makes gold and stops you ever dying!’ said Harry. ‘No wonder Snape’s after it! *Anyone* would want it!’” (Rowling 236). Anyone except for him, as Dumbledore explains when both of them are in the hospital wing at the end of the book: “you see, only one who wanted to find the Stone- find it, but not use it- would be able to get it, otherwise they’d just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life” (Rowling 323). Nevertheless, with the stone’s presence Rowling not only wanted to send a message to children, but to adults as well, specially to the greedy ones, as Dumbledore says to Harry: “As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all- the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things which are worst for them” (320).

Even regarding reading itself, studies have shown that the series inspired Potter readers to explore more difficult books, to read more fiction and more books generally (Dempster et al. 273). In fact, “many, though not all, of [these] enthusiasts consider the Potter books a major contributor to both their self-identification as readers and their wider literacy development” (Dempster et al. 278).

The series highlights other values. Although, Harry Potter has been accused of sexism and lack of diversity, the opposite could be argued. Some scholars claim that “[no] girl is brilliantly heroic the way Harry is, no woman experienced and wise like Professor Dumbledore. In fact, the range of female personalities is so limited that neither women nor girls play on the side of evil” (qtd. in Zipes 179). However, Hermione is powerful enough to be at Harry’s level, as is Ginny, who in the fifth book begins to be a remarkable and powerful witch. In terms of experience and wisdom, Minerva McGonagall, the loyal, just, and strict Head of Gryffindor, excels. Finally, on the side of evil one finds Bellatrix Lestrange, so loyal to Lord Voldemort that she killed part of her family to prove it.

Another controversial statement is that “there are people ‘chosen’ for the task of leadership because they have the right magical skills and good genes. It doesn’t matter

that they happen to be all white, all British, all from good homes, and that men and boys call the shots” (Zipes 183). Regarding the Minister of Magic, it is important to highlight that, at the end of the novels, the final minister is Kingsley Shacklebolt, a black man, and the final Headmistress of Hogwarts was none other than Professor McGonagall. Thus, not all leaders were white and men.

3.3. Impact on our world

There are several factors that helped to create *the Harry Potter* phenomenon, such as the rags-to-riches story that J.K. Rowling experienced herself (Zipes 174). Her personal fortune, as well as the controversy around a book on dark magic becoming that popular (Zipes 174), fed the buzz around the series. As mentioned before, the sales of the series are an important factor. By 2001, the four Harry Potter books available reached the number one international bestsellers, in accordance with Publisher’s Weekly surveys of bestseller lists (Gupta 16). Its impact on the film industry, reaching millions of viewers, is also noteworthy. According to Fortune magazine, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Part 2) earned \$1.34 billion worldwide, meanwhile *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, earned \$975 million.

Furthermore, the Harry Potter series had likewise an impact on music, leading to the creation of a brand new genre known as “wizard rock”; songs based on the plot and the characters of the series. Some music groups that should be mentioned are Harry and the Potters, The Whomping Willows, Draco and the Malfoys, Oliver Boyd & The Remembralls, Gred and Forge, and Ministry of Magic.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the huge impact that *Quidditch* has had. This sport began to be practiced in 2005 at Middlebury College, Vermont, becoming so popular that spread to more colleges in U.S (Black). In fact, an official governing body of the sport was created in 2010, the International Quidditch Association (IQA), which defines the sport as a medley of dodgeball, rugby, and capture-the-flag (Cohen and Peachey 3). It is a full-contact sport that requires tackling, running, throwing, and a co-ed requirement of 4-3, which means four players of one gender and three of the other. As it is based on Harry Potter books, it “features terminology such as “bludgers” (dodgeballs), “quaffles” (volleyballs), and “snitches” (humans draped in yellow clothing with a flag hanging from

a belt), along with the mandatory rule of running with a broom between one's legs at all times" (Cohen and Peachey 4).

Currently, the sport is played by approximately 450 teams all around the world (including Salamanca). The sport became so popular worldwide that the IQA created a World Cup, which is not surprising, in spite of the fact that "Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it's not too easy to play" (Rowling 179).

3.4. Influence on literature

"Harry Potter made children's literature an unstoppable force. Before Harry Potter, children's literature was often considered an afterthought. Sales were failing" (Grady and Romano). However, the huge impact of the Harry Potter series undoubtedly led to the publication of more books and series for children and young adults due to the hype Harry Potter gave to these genres. Many series have followed its epic story about how good defeats evil by means of love and friendship, such as *Percy Jackson*, *The Mortal Instruments*, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, or the *Divergent trilogy*, the latter similar to *Harry Potter* in terms of having teenagers being elected for different factions depending on their character. More books probably influenced by Rowling's work are *The Magicians*, sometimes referred as "Harry Potter goes to college", where a seventeen-year-old boy is accepted in a sorcery university; and *These Witches Don't Burn*, a story of two witches, ex-girlfriends, that discover a sort of dark magic hovering over Salem town and try to stop it. These are just a few of the vast instances of works influenced by Harry Potter, all of these have something in common with the popular saga written by Rowling, be it magic, schools of witchcraft, or a struggle between good and evil.

Moreover, it is questionable that Harry Potter is a reading for children only. By 2000, the New York Times Book Review had to create a separate list for children's fiction, placing the series to the top of it. In accordance with Gupta, "Barbara Marcus, President of the Scholastic Children's Book Group, noted bitterly that 30 per cent of the first three in the series had been bought by and for readers who were 35 or older" (9). In order to confirm this percentage, a survey was carried out in 2001, the results of which showed that out of 1373 respondents, 47 per cent of adults planned to buy Harry Potter books, and 32 per cent of them admitted to buying these products for themselves (9). In fact, at one point the New York Times wanted to exclude children's literature as a category of less

acceptable best-sellers. However, as Harry Potter took a starring place on mainstream cultural stage, this exclusionary procedure became less and less possible to ignore (Fitzsimmons 81).

IV. Conclusion

The present research aimed to explore the universe of Harry Potter in order to answer the following question: will Harry Potter become a classic? It could be argued that this series has already found its place amongst the classics of literature. Nowadays, it is not possible to talk about children's literature without mentioning the books about "the boy who lived".

Furthermore, we should not forget that, despite belonging to the genre of children's literature, it is read and admired equally by children and adults, becoming the most sold and translated book series in the world. Besides, Rowling's creation expanded into a cultural phenomenon that included a new sport and a new music genre, not to mention the influence it had on later children's books.

To sum up, I have discussed the importance of children's literature, as well as the different approaches to the literary canon, from which we can extract the idea that every piece of literature is part of the canon, given that much of the decision regards personal taste and criteria that goes beyond the aesthetic. Finally, the strengths of the series, its intertextuality, impact and values, explain why it will become a classic, even beyond the tag of children's literature. For, in Philip Nel's words: "Great works endure for the ages, regardless of the age of their readers" (27).

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